

The Yemen Crisis

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) presents the following backgrounder on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as of July 24, 2020. Information and maps are from various sources and not the original work of USCRI.

Quick Overview

The situation in Yemen (“Yemen Crisis”) is currently the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, impacting more than 24 million people, nearly half of them children.¹ Starting as a failed political transition, the armed conflict escalated in 2015 and has steadily grown worse, causing widespread displacement, spread of disease, famine, poverty, and death.²

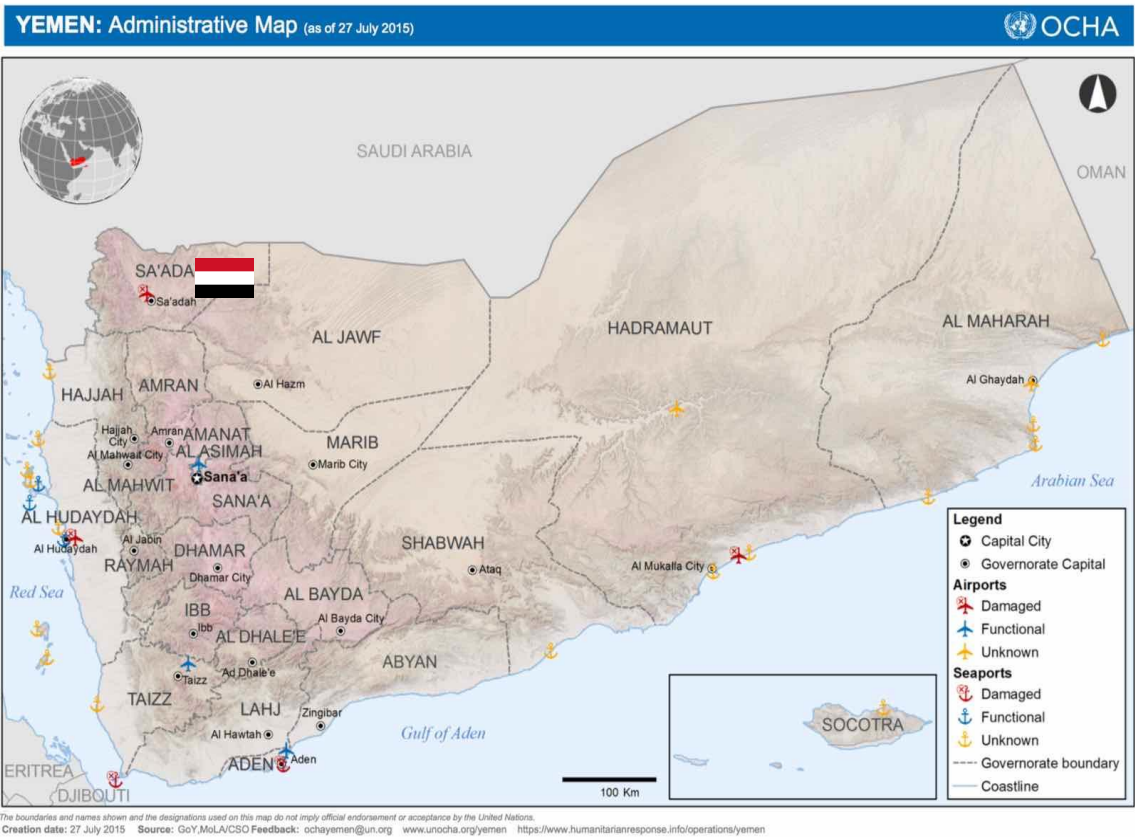
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WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization that responds to the needs and advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants worldwide.

Basic Information



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Demographics⁴

Population: 29.2 million
 Population ages 0-14: 39% (USA: 19%)
 Population ages 15-64: 58% (USA: 65%)
 Gross Domestic Product (GDP), per capita: \$968 (USA: \$65,280)

Yemen: Nearly 60 Years of Instability

While the most recent humanitarian crisis was sparked by escalated conflict starting in 2015, the roots of the present situation are entrenched in the country's recent history.

1962 marked the first political uprising in Yemen against the theocracy, Imamate, that had ruled for about 1,000 years what would come to be known as North Yemen. Meanwhile, South Yemen was occupied by British forces until 1967. That year, North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic, YAR) and South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, PDRY) officially became two separate republics through various violent uprisings. The rift between the two grew wider in 1978 as the two Yemens became staging grounds for a Cold War proxy war when the capitalist political party took control in the north and the socialist party in the south. Soon, the United States backed the north, and the Soviet Union, the south.⁵

After years of intermittent turmoil and violence between YAR and PDRY, the discovery of oil in the border regions between the two countries provided both sides with a financial incentive to strengthen their relations. In April 1990, the two countries signed a unity agreement to merge the PDRY and YAR into a new, single entity, the Republic of Yemen.⁶ The agreement, in terms of detail and consideration, was poorly developed and executed. It was also rushed due to the approaching collapse of the Soviet Union and therefore the loss of the PDRY's financial and political supporter.⁷ Yet, the country's north and south had long been fractured by religious differences, experiences with colonialism, and Arabic dialects and a unity agreement did not magically eradicate these rifts.⁸ Former YAR president Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of the newly unified country, spurring more resentment. Citizens became quickly disenchanted with the unity arrangement leading to civil war and rebellion, instigated by the Houthi movement, an Islamic political and armed group.⁹

Fast forward through 11 years and several civil wars led by the Houthis to 2011, when the Arab Spring movement took hold in the Middle East and North Africa. Among the many leaders deposed in the movement was Saleh, who had remained president since 1990. Taking advantage of the ensuing power vacuum, the Houthis extended a network of forces across northern Yemen to locations that one Houthi field commander termed "hegemony points."¹⁰ By March 2011, the Yemeni military had been expelled from many parts of the north of the country, the Houthi movement had adopted the formal name of Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), and dissenting tribes were suppressed.¹¹ The Houthis soon gained greater traction when both Hezbollah in Lebanon and the government of Iran gave official backing to the movement, greatly increasing the military and technological capabilities of the Houthis.¹² While another president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, had taken office, this had little impact. In January 2015, the Houthis had taken over the capital of Sana'a, forcing the government to retreat south to the port city of Aden. President Hadi and the rest of the government were forced to resign and fled to Saudi Arabia, seeking support.¹³ With Iran backing the Houthis and Saudi Arabia backing the government of Yemen in what became yet another proxy war between hegemonies in the region, the domestic civil war had turned into a conflict of international proportions.

In March 2015, the Saudi Arabian-led intervention in Yemen, which included Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan,





Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), began with airstrikes and a naval blockade with the stated goal of restoring Hadi's government to power. The coalition was backed by the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, all of which have strategic natural resource interests in the region.¹⁴ Yet, the Houthis have continued to gain control of the country, along with terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. Over the five years since the intervention, the conflict spread to engulf the entire country and saw a proliferation in the parties to the conflict, including a number of coalition-backed armed groups. While the UN-backed talks in Sweden that concluded in late 2018 resulted in patchy and fragile ceasefires in Hodeidah throughout 2019, it did not result in prisoner exchanges as originally hoped.¹⁵

The United States in particular has waxed and waned in its involvement in Yemen. At the start of the intervention, the Administration announced that the United States would provide “logistical and intelligence support” to the coalition’s operations without taking “direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort.”¹⁶ At the United Nations Security Council, the United States supported the passage of Resolution 2216 in April 2015, which, among other things, required Member States to impose an arms embargo against the Houthi-Saleh forces and demanded that the Houthis withdraw from all areas seized during the conflict.¹⁷ Congress has considered and passed proposals to reject certain U.S. defense sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and to direct an end to U.S. military involvement in military operations related to the anti-Houthi campaign, but has not voted to override presidential vetoes of related legislation.¹⁸

All in all, the last effort by the Yemeni parties to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the growing conflict was in 2015 in Stockholm. In response to their demands, the United Nations (UN) negotiated an agreement among the various parties, but the Houthis refused to fulfill its terms and the initiative collapsed by the end of the year.¹⁹

Current Situation

Currently, there are four separate forces fighting for control of Yemen. While some of the forces appear to be on the same side of the conflict, this is not the case, leading to fractured efforts for lasting peace.

Force	 Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG)	 Houthi Forces (Ansar Allah)	 Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP)	 Southern Transitional Council (STC)
Backer	Saudi Arabia (and coalition members)	Iran Hezbollah of Lebanon	Al Qaeda network	UAE
Entered	2011	1990	2009	2017
Type	Internationally recognized government of Yemen	Rebel group	Terrorist group	Separatist group

<i>Control</i>	Varying control in central and east parts of country	Strong control of west/northwest parts of country	Control of limited parts of central and south-central parts of country	Control of southern ports of Aden and Mukalla
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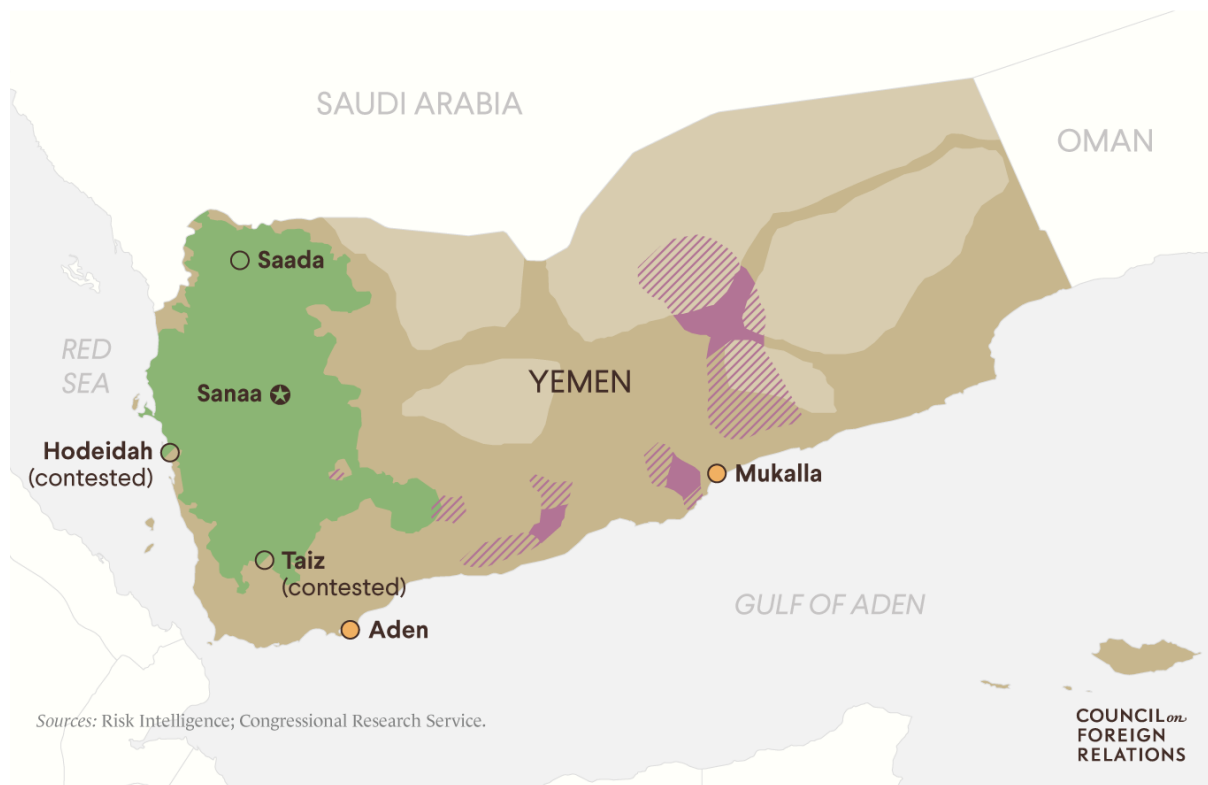
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For example, it would appear that Saudi-backed ROYG and UAE-backed STC are on the same side of the conflict against terrorists and rebels, but this is not the general case. In summer 2019, in southern Yemen, long-simmering tensions between ROYG and STC boiled over, leading to open warfare between the local allies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.²¹ Such a fractured anti-Houthi resistance has only allowed the Houthis to gain strength.

Yemen's Front Lines

Territorial control and influence as of February 2020

- Government control ● Government influence ● Southern Transitional Council control
- Houthi control ● Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) control ▨ AQAP influence



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Impacts

The direct and indirect impacts of the conflict in Yemen are significant and wide-reaching, even in regions where fighting is not active. Failed infrastructure and economy, poor food, water, and human security, limited access to health care, and great numbers of displaced persons and refugees are commonplace. As an indirect consequence, instances of human trafficking have also increased.

Moreover, nearly half of those detrimentally impacted are children. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought more destruction and challenges to the already dire situation.

Infrastructure and economy

According to the World Bank, more than 40% of households in Yemen are estimated to have lost their primary source of income and, consequently, find it difficult to even sustain basic nutrition. Prior to 2015, poverty affected nearly half the population. After the worsening of the crisis, between 71 per cent and 78 per cent live in poverty with women more severely affected than men.²³

Since 2015, Yemen's already struggling economy has contracted by around 50 per cent. Amid the conflict, the state has almost depleted its foreign reserves and the Central Bank of Yemen "remains largely dysfunctional", according to the World Bank. The central bank is also at the center of a political dispute between the internationally recognized Hadi government and the Houthi government.²⁴ Prior to the escalation of the conflict, oil accounted for 90% of exports. While oil facilities have not been damaged, blockades and volatility have caused transportation, and thus trade to decline sharply, hindering economic activity and fuel inflation.²⁵

In addition to drastic economic decline, civilian infrastructure has been largely destroyed. A 2016 damage and needs assessment estimated the cost of damage to overall physical infrastructure (including housing) to be between US \$4–US \$5 billion. This includes: (a) US \$88–US \$108 million in damage to transportation; (b) US \$125–US \$153 million to energy; and, (c) US \$79–US \$97 million to water, sanitation and hygiene.²⁶ Over half of respondents to a 2018 survey said that local water and electric infrastructure had been damaged, over 40 per cent listed health and education infrastructure and over 30 per cent mentioned roads were damaged.²⁷ Children are particularly affected in this area as more than 2,500 schools in 20 governorates have been damaged, used by internally displaced people (IDPs), or occupied by armed groups.²⁸ As a result, between 20 per cent and 33 per cent of schools in Yemen have suffered damage or occupation and are unfit for use as schools.²⁹

Food and water security

In 2019, the UN estimated that 24.1 million people—80% of the population—was "at risk" of hunger and disease, of whom roughly 14.3 million were in acute need of assistance.³⁰ Parties to the conflict have attacked critical water and food production systems and various armed forces have blocked many humanitarian aid shipments from reaching populations in need.³¹ Aid shipments of food that have successfully made it through blockades rarely reach needy populations. Rather, these aid packages make their way into the underground black market economy where they are sold at extremely inflated prices despite the fact they were meant to be delivered for free, leaving many unable to buy basic food.³² Agricultural production is greatly diminished.³³

Water security is also an issue of primary concern. Over 19 million people in Yemen lack adequate sanitation or safe water.³⁴ Unsafe water conditions have led to the largest cholera outbreak in epidemiologically recorded history with 1.3 million suspected cases and over 2,600 related deaths since 2017.³⁵

Human security

Human security is a daily concern for civilian Yemenis. Between 2016 and 2018, over 63,000 combatants and civilians were killed due to direct violence.³⁶ By the end of 2019, this number had risen to 100,000.³⁷ The various armed forces have arbitrarily detained civilians, including children, abused detainees and held them in poor conditions, and abducted or forcibly disappeared people perceived to be political opponents or security threats.³⁸

Women and girls are particularly at risk for violence. Women and girls in Yemen were marginalized prior to the current conflict and in 2014, ranked the worst on the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index.³⁹ The conflict has only worsened the human security risks for women and girls. Increased rates of gender-based violence, early marriage, and limited mobility have been widely reported.⁴⁰

Health care

Access to even basic health care is limited. At least 278 health care facilities have been damaged or destroyed with less than half of health care facilities in Yemen fully functional.⁴¹ The few that are operational are strained and underequipped, struggling with shortages of basic and essential medicines, supplies, medical workers, basic resources, safe water, fuel, and power.⁴²

As discussed above, poor water conditions have led to a devastating outbreak of cholera among other diseases. An estimated 19.7 million are without adequate healthcare. As a result, Yemen has been grappling with mass outbreaks of preventable diseases, such as cholera, diphtheria, measles, and Dengue Fever.⁴³

Displaced persons and refugees

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that since March 2015 3.65 million people have been displaced within Yemen, most of them for more than a year, as a result of the conflict.⁴⁴ Women and children make up three-quarters of the displaced.⁴⁵

Around 266,000 refugees have fled the country into neighboring Oman and Saudi Arabia, and also have crossed the Red Sea, heading into Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan.⁴⁶ Simultaneously, since the 1980s, large numbers of refugees from Somalia have come to Yemen. As an indirect impact, the Yemen conflict has forced thousands to return to Somalia to conditions only slightly better than those in Yemen. Since 2017, the United Nations has returned around 4,500 Somali refugees back to Somalia.⁴⁷

Children

Perhaps the most devastating impact of the Yemen conflict has been on children. Of the more than 24 million people impacted, nearly half are children.⁴⁸

Of the dead, 60 per cent are children under the age of five, 45 per cent caused by malnutrition.⁴⁹ In 2019, one child died in Yemen every 11 minutes and 54 seconds.⁵⁰ Tens of thousands of children have died each year since 2015 from preventable causes, like diarrhea and respiratory infections.⁵¹

Two million children completely lack access to education and child marriage is on the rise.⁵² In addition, as many are out of school, according to the United Nations, thousands of children have been recruited

or trafficked into roles in the armed conflict – of 3,034 children recruited throughout the war in Yemen, 1,940—64 per cent—were recruited by the Houthis.⁵³

Human Trafficking

The vulnerabilities that Yemenis have on account of the instability in the country, such as accessing food and other basic necessities, have facilitated human trafficking networks that prey on the weak and impoverished. Since 2015, Yemen has been classified as a Special Case by the U.S. Department of State, reporting that the ongoing conflict, lack of rule of law, economic degradation, pervasive corruption, and fractional territorial control have disrupted some trafficking patterns and exacerbated others.⁵⁴

There are several varying trafficking patterns affecting Yemen. First, migrants crossing the Gulf of Aden from the African continent into Yemen to seek employment in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are trafficked for both sex and labor during their journeys to and from the Gulf countries. In 2014, the majority of interviewed Ethiopian migrants reported abuse, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, indefinite detention, debt bondage, and unpaid labor during their irregular migration journeys.⁵⁵

Second, Yemenis fleeing conflict to neighboring Saudi Arabia and Oman are also susceptible to both labor and sex trafficking. Nongovernmental organizations have reported that the security forces, police, military, and intelligence services of the internationally recognized government of Yemen have been complicit in and have facilitated trafficking of Yemeni citizens. Officials have been engaging in trafficking themselves, warning traffickers of impending raids, ensuring the release of arrested traffickers, and providing assistance to trafficking networks.⁵⁶ In addition, the government has not pursued any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials complicit in trafficking offenses, despite reports of officials allegedly engaged in trafficking, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Republic of Yemen Government's Armed Forces.⁵⁷

Third are Yemenis exploited domestically. Women in particular find themselves at risk of being forced into sexual slavery and debt bondage in order to survive - in some cases servicing local militias and state militaries - while men are forced into manual labor.⁵⁸ In addition, the government has not pursued any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials complicit in trafficking offenses, despite reports of officials allegedly engaged in trafficking, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers by the Republic of Yemen Government's Armed Forces.⁵⁹

COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Yemen has compounded the already entrenched issues. Beyond the lack of health care resources, the nature of the pandemic has aggravated all issues discussed above and spurred fresh displacement.

First, many of the limited number of people who have retained employment have lost it on account of the virus and those looking for employment now face greater hurdles. For example, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reports that displaced women who used to work as maids are forced to beg in the streets because potential employers are afraid they are carrying the virus.⁶⁰

Second, the pandemic has created a significant humanitarian funding shortage for most intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations in Yemen. IOM's \$155 million appeal for funding from April to December to provide comprehensive assistance to around five million people, is around 50 per cent funded.⁶¹ The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reports that its appeal for additional COVID-19 funding is only 10 per cent funded and its overall humanitarian appeal is only 30 per cent funded.⁶² As a result, the agency estimates that the number of malnourished children could reach 2.4 million by the end of 2020, marking a 20 per cent increase, among other detrimental effects.⁶³

Third, the pandemic only exacerbates the issues surrounding delivery of humanitarian aid to Yemen. COVID-19 has now ushered in new restrictions, including a reduced number and frequency of flights into and out of Yemen and difficulties securing visas and movement authorization. Disruptions to supply chains and movement restrictions related to COVID-19 are already undermining critical humanitarian programming. For instance, the country faced a 19% drop across five routine immunizations in March and April compared to the same period last year, threatening a resurgence of preventable diseases. Without a resumption of activities, around one in four eligible children will miss vaccinations.⁶⁴

The Future of the Yemen Crisis

Several solutions have been put forward, including re-dividing the country into two. However, while such a geopolitical solution would solve some issues, others, such as human trafficking and terrorist group occupation, are far more entrenched for such a one-sided approach. The international community must arrive at a multi-faceted, inclusive solution in order to slow, and eventually end, the Yemen crisis. Otherwise, we will see the issues continue to metastasize and spill over into surrounding countries.

USCRI will continue to monitor the situation in Yemen, particularly focusing on issues related to IDPs, refugees, children, and victims of trafficking. As the pandemic continues, USCRI will also provide updates on the impact of the virus on the country and its people.

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